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# INQUIRY

## Topic: HUNTING NAZIS

Rabbi Marvin Hier, 46, is dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, which has called for an intensified search for Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele. Hier, who founded Yeshiva University of Los Angeles and co-wrote and co-produced the Academy Award-winning documentary *Genocide*, was interviewed by USA TODAY's Gregory Katz.



Rabbi Hier

## This is the year we must get Mengele

**USA TODAY:** Do you believe the United States government helped Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele escape?

**HIER:** We do not know all there is to know about the U.S. connection, that's for sure. Proof of this is the fact that suddenly the CIA has documents. There are many skeletons in the history of the Counter Intelligence Corps — the Army agency conducting intelligence after World War II. What we know about the background of the CIC is that they did those kinds of things. So it certainly wouldn't be far-fetched to assume that they had some use for Mengele.

**USA TODAY:** What are some of the leads you're following to find Mengele?

**HIER:** One trail that unfortunately is cold now because the person died is the Otto Skorzeny trail. Skorzeny was Hitler's commando and, after the war, I believe he was working for the United States. He was jailed after the war and his escape is suspicious — people dressed in U.S. uniforms got him out. Two years later, he came back to Germany, the place he escaped from. It's just not logical.

**USA TODAY:** And you believe he was connected to Mengele?

**HIER:** Skorzeny had tremendous clout. After he came back to Germany in 1948, he stayed for nine months in Bavaria. Joseph Mengele lived in Bavaria at that time, before he is believed to have left for South America, between 1949 to 1951. Mengele left Bavaria and went — some say — to Italy, Spain, and then to Argentina. We don't really know. But Skorzeny had set up Spain as his headquarters.

**USA TODAY:** Why would the USA have anything to do with Skorzeny?

**HIER:** Skorzeny had an assignment to help fight communism. He was useful to the United States in that respect. The question is whether there was a *quid pro quo*: "As long as you do our work, we'll let you carry on your little Nazi work on the side." Some say Skorzeny ran the escape routes that got Mengele and Adolf Eichmann out. If the USA knew all of his activities, because they were shadowing him around the clock, they would even know the names of the people that he was getting out, and that implicates them very deeply. That has never been proven, but it is a trail that is really worth a thorough investigation because it might lead to the conclusion that the United States knew everything Skorzeny was doing — and didn't act.

**USA TODAY:** Is it possible then, that U.S. officials at times knew where Mengele was?

**HIER:** Yes, they could have pinpointed where Mengele was in a second, but it wasn't in their interest to do so. They looked the other way, and that is an indictment. That's a very strong indictment.

**USA TODAY:** What are some active leads that may shed light on Mengele's whereabouts now?

**HIER:** There is a man named Ricardo Riefenstahl, who is in jail in Germany on drug trafficking charges. He's a professor from Paraguay, an expert in bees. There are two people who claim that Riefenstahl told them on two occasions that Mengele had stayed with him in 1979, 1980, 1981. Riefenstahl denies it, but if it could be substantiated that Riefenstahl is lying, it would also show that Paraguayan President Alfredo Stroessner lied when he said that Mengele hasn't been seen there.

You can't live that openly in Paraguay, file official papers, and not be known to the secret police.

**USA TODAY:** What else have you got?

**HIER:** There are tips that come in every day that have to be analyzed, and a lot of them are a waste of time. But some turn up something. The most important thing in the Mengele case, in the last 35 years is that he has always been the property of Nazi hunters. Today he's the property of the world, of the U.S. government, because the U.S. government has entered the case. I think there is a tremendous feeling out there that this is the year we've got to get Mengele, and that has been brought about by the USA's involvement in the case.

Continued

**USA TODAY:** How did the U.S. government get involved?

**HIER:** This was brought about by the Gorby document, which shows that Mengele may have been held in a U.S. Army prison camp but let go. Without the Gorby document, the United States wouldn't have had a reason to get in. Now, the United States has assigned teams and teams of people to look at the documents. I hope they do the right thing.

**USA TODAY:** How many governments are actively looking for him?

**HIER:** The truth is, it's one thing for attorneys to look for him, and it's another thing for counterintelligence agents. In the past, the trail was cold. Nobody was there. The West Germans filed extradition requests, posted rewards, but they never answered one question: How many counterintelligence agents in the field do you have looking for Mengele 24 hours a day, seven days a week? None. Absolutely none.

**USA TODAY:** How about Israel's efforts?

**HIER:** The same with Israel. They don't want to stick their neck out alone. Everybody is looking for someone else to do it. I happen to know off the record — no, you can be on the record, but I just won't tell you my source — that the Israelis discussed with Washington a short while ago the establishment of a world arrest order.

**USA TODAY:** What's the value of a world arrest order?

**HIER:** It seems to me that a world arrest order may be an instrument of legality so that the whole world should know it's legal to grab Mengele, whether you ask the local government or not.

**USA TODAY:** In other words, a world arrest order would give you or me the CIA jurisdiction to take someone like Mengele into custody?

**HIER:** Yes. Or the Mossad, Israel's Secret Service. The fact that they would ask that of our government might be an indication that there is new talk of forming such a team. If he's being kept, as we believe he is, in Paraguay, the idea is to penetrate the cover. It's like lifting a piece of wood — whenever a piece of wood is lifted, he's got to run. If the Riefenstahl thing is true, Mengele would be in trouble because he would have to leave all of these people he knew. When he leaves them and they have no more use for him, and vice versa, they might talk.

**USA TODAY:** Let's say Mengele is somewhere in Paraguay, living on a large hacienda surrounded by a barbed wire fence with 20 private guards with sub-machine guns patrolling the perimeter. What can anyone do?

**HIER:** We might begin a campaign of a different kind. There's a reward worth millions. I don't know if the people of Paraguay fully know that. The question is filtering that information all the way down. Then we prefer to send somebody down — an undercover person, as opposed to someone that goes openly. One goal is to get one of his military people who knows the information to squeal for the reward and to give credible evidence so that a commando operation can take place.

**USA TODAY:** Does anyone really know where Mengele actually is?

**HIER:** We do not know where Mengele is, except for the fact that the latest information is that he returned to Paraguay in December, 1984, after a short visit to Bolivia. That's the latest information we have. We do not know where he is now. If we did, we would make sure that a team would try to take him out.

**USA TODAY:** What more can the USA do?

**HIER:** I think President Reagan should make a public statement about it. Something that would send a signal to the entire world and scare the hell out of Paraguay would be for the president to say that he is ordering the CIA to make the capture of Mengele a top priority. Instead, the case remains the property of the Justice Department. There is no indication that counterintelligence is involved. So it is in the hands of the Justice Department Office of Special Investigations. They're a very good organization. They have an admirable record in the USA, but they're not an intelligence agency overseas.

**USA TODAY:** What can you and the center do?

**HIER:** Now our job is to control the information so that every time there is an appearance that the Mengele case is dying we can resurrect it with new information. We have not given out all the information that we have, because if you give it all out at one time, the case will die. What we want to achieve is to get the president to stay on the case. That's our objective. Next to getting Mengele, the first objective is to make it so hot that the president has to tell the CIA to get involved. That's what we want.

## The 'Angel of Death'

Born to a wealthy Bavarian family 74 years ago, Nazi "Angel of Death" Josef Mengele joined Hitler's elite S.S. guard in 1939 and was made chief doctor at the Auschwitz death camp in 1943.

While at Auschwitz, Mengele reportedly sent more than 400,000 Jews to their deaths. He also is accused of conducting sadistic medical experiments that killed and maimed countless prisoners.

After Hitler fell, Mengele returned to Bavaria, then fled to Argentina in 1949, using the alias Helmut Gregor. He stayed there until Juan Peron — who welcomed Nazis — was overthrown in 1955.

Mengele then went to Paraguay, where he obtained citizenship in 1959. He lived openly there for some years before going back underground. Authorities in West Germany, Israel, and the USA are looking for him, but hard information is scarce.

Recently declassified CIA documents suggest that Mengele is somewhere in South America, may have had a face lift, and may be involved in international drug trafficking.

Private groups have offered \$2.3 million in reward money, and Sen. Edward Kennedy wants the U.S. government to add \$1 million to the bounty.

Source: USA TODAY research